

Chessa's Doom

By Peter Schweighofer; Illustrations by John Lona.



"And that's all there is to tell," Starter said.

"That was a tall tale," Platt cried, tilting her head and her platinum blonde hair back. "What a load of bantha dung."

"I especially enjoyed the part where you took out the Star Destroyer single-handedly," Tru'eb said, almost earnestly. "You've got a great flair for the heroic."

"Look, that's how it happened," Starter pleaded. "Honest."

"Yea, but you have to admit, it was a great tale," Jai added.

"Say, Harkness, you've been pretty quiet all night," Starter said. "Certainly you've got some tale to best my Star Destroyer line."

Harkness looked up from his mug, surveyed his companions gathered around the center table at Gorkin's Rest, and scratched at the white patch over his left eye.

He looked back into his mug.

"Aw, Harkness, don't pull that mopin' stuff on us," Platt said. "We know you too well."

"Come on, Dirk, tell just one story," Jai asked, rubbing her hand against Harkness' shoulder.

Harkness set his mug onto the table, leaned back in his chair and propped his boots up on the table.

"One story. No more."

"Great! Tell us how an old crab like you got into the Rebellion and all," Starter said.

"I wasn't always a crab," Harkness started. "I used to be a pretty happy-go-lucky kinda guy. It all started about the time the first Death Star was destroyed. I was maybe 20, 21 years old..."

"You were not!" Jai said, jabbing his shoulder. "You're not that young."

Harkness smiled at Jai. "I had been working on this freighter as the ship's mechanic. The first mate and I, well, we had something going."

"This was Chessa, right?" Jai asked.

"Yeah, her name was Chessa, and she was just about the smartest spacefaring person I had come to know in those days. We used to sit around the engineering station and daydream about getting married, living on a peaceful little world and raising a family.

"But like all paths in our lives, the Empire had to step into this one, too.

"We had just finished unloading a cargo of repulsor engines in Kelada starport. Captain Granf had already gone into the starport to settle some deals, leaving Chessa and I to unload the cargo. I had figured the ground transport crews had taken all the crates, when Chessa comes up to me, wanting me to help her load some spare crates onto a cargo skiff..."

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"What is all this stuff?" Dirk asked, sliding the last long crate onto the cargo skiff.

Chessa was securing the other crates in the skiff. "Oh, just some spare parts I set aside for a special order. A guy in Kelada I know has a repulsorlift repair shop and he likes to have a good supply of spares around."

"And what are you doing after you make this special delivery?" Dirk asked.

Chessa leaned over the crates and the railing of the skiff and kissed Dirk gently on the forehead. "Why don't we go to this place I know..."

"I could buy you dinner,"
Dirk suggested.

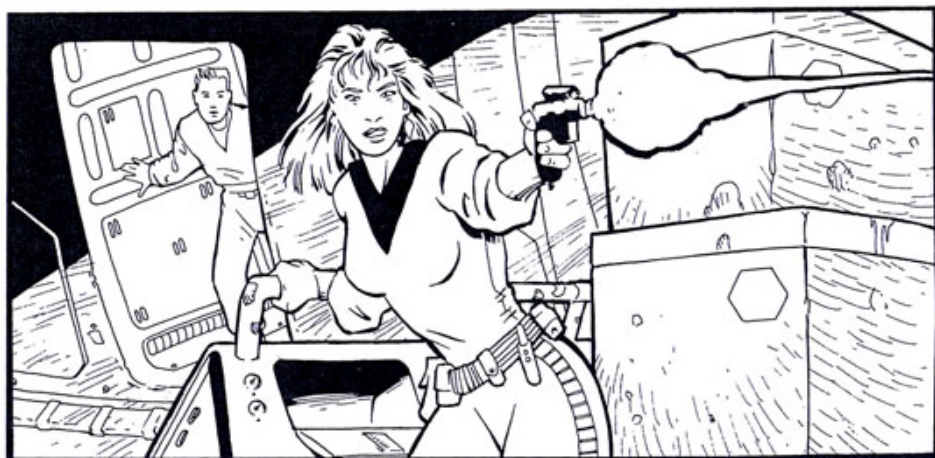
"Or I could buy *you*
dinner," Chessa said,
kissing him on the
forehead again. "I gotta
go."

"Well, I'll be inside
cleaning up," Dirk said,
heading up the
freighter's cargo ramp.
"See you in a while."

He stopped just inside
the cargo bay to
wistfully watch Chessa
secure the rest of the
crates.

Dirk was about to head
toward the hatch to
engineering when he
heard a different voice
out in the docking bay.

"Halt!" the stormtrooper
sergeant called. Dirk
peered out from the
corner of the cargo bay
hatch. Eight
stormtroopers were
advancing toward Chessa from the landing bay's wide cargo port. "What's in those crates?" the sergeant said. "We want to see some identification..."



The blaster flashed, there were shouts, stormtroopers fell, and Dirk screamed. He kept pulling the trigger until his ears burned with the sound of its blasts.

When Harkness opened his eyes, he was at the personnel entrance to the docking bay. He dropped the blaster pistol from his shaking hand and steadied himself against the doorway. He heard voices behind him in the docking bay. He didn't look back. Harkness ran out into the streets of Kelada starport.

Harkness didn't know how long he ran; it was all a blur of city streets, spacers staring at him, views of the ground, of the sky, the roar of freighters lifting off and the spinning entrances to docking bays.

He stopped in front of a small storefront, it might have been a bar. "Go on in, kid," said a passing spacer who shoved him toward the door. "You look like you need a drink."

The doors flew open and Harkness stumbled into a confusing throng of spacers, smoke and chatter.

"Hey, watch it, bud!"

"Gley hinga to'el natcha!"

"You okay, kid?"

"Yulek nak otkev!"

"The bar's that way."

The bar materialized before Harkness' eyes and he nearly crashed into it. He threw his arms onto the bar and buried his face. "Hey, there, kid, can I getcha a drink?"

The woman behind the bar was easily old enough to be Harkness' mother, and had a matronly manner about her. Perhaps it was her greasy barkeep's apron.

Harkness looked up, his eyes bloodshot and bleary. He nodded.

"What kind?" the woman asked.

Harkness shrugged. He tapped two fingers on the bar.

"Why don't I getcha a Noonian Fixer? Maybe it'll help you forget your problems."

When the woman returned, she slid the drink right up to Harkness. He fumbled through his pockets for some credits, but found only some spare ventrator washers and some clamps for a power feed.

The woman behind the bar scrutinized Harkness for a moment. "A little short on creds? Don't worry, it's on the house."

Harkness looked down and sipped at his drink. When he looked up again, the woman was gone.

He nursed the drink. It was stronger than he preferred, but he didn't care. Chessa was dead.



Over the ale bulbs and the tubes of the automix machines were other patrons at a second bar. The swarming crowd and the stuffiness in the bar almost made Harkness pass out. He rested his head on the bar before taking another sip from his drink.

He almost leaped back when he saw the man across the bar. He was staring directly at Harkness like a cornered gundark. Was that foam dripping from his lips? The man just stared. His hair was pushed in every direction, and his face was one big smear of dirt and tears.

"Don't get too spooked," the woman behind the bar said, blocking Harkness' view. "It's just a mirror. The whole dive is filled with 'em."

Harkness stared at his image in the mirror, the face of a lost man. He didn't look like a starship engineer, he looked like something dragged out of a pile of dirty, wet bantha fur. His eyes had changed; now there was no light within them.

"Hey, take it easy, son," the one with the closely-trimmed beard said. "We're here to help."

"We're friends of Chessa's," said the other one through his dark moustache. "We heard something happened to her."

Harkness tried to tell them she was dead, but no words passed his lips.

The two men looked at each other, then turned back to Harkness. "You can tell us about it later," the bearded man said, gently taking Harkness by the arm. "Right now we've got to get you to a safe place."

* * *

"And that's how I met General Corros and joined the Rebellion."

"No exploding Star Destroyers or big dogfights?" Starter cried in disbelief.

That's it," Harkness said, removing his feet from the table and retreating into his corner.

"I must admit," Platt said, "Your tale is just about as subdued brooding as you are."

"But it does reveal the complexities behind the origin of Dirk's disposition," Tru'eb added.

"What happened after you met Corros?" Starter asked. "How'd you get involved with Alliance Intelligence?"

"Like I said, only one story for tonight." Harkness stared back into the bottom of his mug.

